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Chris Smith and Paul Thompson

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PAPERS

Re-Evaluating the Labour Process Debate

Chris Smith
Royal Holloway, University of London
Paul Thompson
Edinburgh University

From the publication of Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* there has been a continued debate on the labour process in Britain. What relevance does this polemic have for the contemporary global restructuring of work? This article reviews the main developments within the broad labour process debate, including changes in the division of labour, control structures and cultural management. In addition, it links labour process enquiry to wider structural trends and the relationship between the idea of a specifically capitalist labour process and divergent national ways of organizing work. The authors argue that the tools and concepts of labour process theory remain equally important for analysing today's workplace.

Introduction

Earlier this year academics and activists gathered in Binghamton, up-state New York, to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the publication of Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (*LMC*) and a major conference in the same place 20 years ago. From the tone and content of the contributions, the participants seemed confident of the continued relevance of labour process theory (LPT) in an era of downsizing, flexibility and growing job insecurity. In Britain LPT remains an influential part of mainstream academic debate, the Labour Process Conference having reached its 16th successful year. Nevertheless as the years have gone by a growing number of commentators have claimed that LPT is either rendered marginal by its own flaws, or bypassed by real changes in production and work organization. This article takes the opportunity of re-evaluating

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the debate, not by retracing its steps, but by examining how LPT has responded to new theoretical and practical challenges. It argues that the claims of new paradigm theorists are largely unjustified, though real changes are taking place. We examine the diverse paths taken within labour process analysis in order to extend the original framework, notably the attempts to provide an account of subjectivity. Our view is that while there are important issues at stake, there are more fruitful ways to open out labour process theory, in particular to situate workplace relations between capital and labour within the context of new patterns of global competition. Of course this kind of argument partly reflects the particular form the debate has taken in Britain and it is part of our purpose to reflect this. But the general issues are surely of wider concern and help to answer the question of whether LPT has a future as well as a past.

Changes in the Contemporary Workplace Division of Labour

Labour process theory became associated, in many ways misleadingly, with a deskilling thesis. For a decade after the publication of *LMC* argument raged over the extent and character of changes in workplace divisions of labour, but the *trend* towards fragmentation of traditional skills and limits to new ones seemed clear. The new decade, however, brought with it the rise of 'new paradigms' – flexible specialization, regulation theory, post-Fordism, lean production, the new production concepts. Though distinctive in their respective concepts and claims they were all optimistic about the link between advanced manufacturing systems and the utilization of skilled labour. In most cases this did not rely on an argument that Braverman and LPT were wrong, merely that they were outdated. For each of the new paradigms relied on a polarity between mass production and some form of flexibility that breaks with Fordism and Taylorism. Nor was this confined to manufacturing and the factory floor. For example, Baran (1988) concedes that the first wave of office automation largely conformed to Braverman's picture, but argues that a second wave is ushering in a reintegrated labour process and multi-activity jobs.

Some perspectives appear to go backwards from Braverman and emphasize new forms of craft labour. This is particularly the case with flexible specialization theories (Piore and Sabel, 1984) that argue that a division of labour based on fragmented skills and

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repetitive work is incompatible with the new technological, market conditions. These require intellectual participation from workers with upgraded skills and greater autonomy. Similar themes emerge in the influential work of Kern and Schumann (1984) on 'new production concepts'. They talk of reprofessionalization based on reintegration of mental and manual labour and an extensive degree of autonomy in the work environment. In contrast to craft labour, the new 'professionals' combine a variety of different skills. More recently, partisans of 'lean production' have pursued the twin themes of 'smarter' and more autonomous workers, but with the emphasis shifting to the value of team-based operations, within which multiskilled workers will use highly flexible, automated machines to produce the necessary variety of products (Womack et al., 1990: 13–14). Finally, knowledge work theories (Barley, 1996; Castells, 1996) emphasize the replacement of the old vertical division of labour by horizontal forms of coordination based on collegiate collaboration within and between groups, the management of information and ideas rather than command and control. From Reich's (1993) symbolic analysis through to empowered team workers, hierarchies are being replaced by networks.

The optimistic outcomes of all these processes are spelled out by Mathews (1993: 7):

> In place of command and control structures designed to enforce rigidity and compliance, the new production systems call for management that offers facilitation, guidance and co-ordination between self-managing groups of employees who are capable of looking after the details of production themselves.

Other managerial initiatives, notably total quality management (TQM), are held to offer a more interdependent workplace, with flatter structures and reduced hierarchy. If these greater practical and ideological interdependencies are created and sustained, the logical outcome would be decisive changes in relations between the major actors in the workplace. The differences between capital (and its managerial agents) and labour would be blurred and alliances of self-interest developed. Tony Smith (1994: 42) summarizes the argument: 'In flexible production systems the rational self-interest of those who own and control capital leads them to transform work relations in a way that is in the interests of labour.'

There are some well-known and highly effective general critiques of the idea of a fundamental break in capitalist production and markets (Williams et al., 1987; Pollert, 1991; Hyman, 1991), which

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we will not repeat here. Our initial emphasis is on research, particularly influenced by LPT, that has mounted a sustained critique of the claims of new paradigms with respect to the two traditional labour process spheres of skill and control.

Skill and the Division of Labour

It is recognized that skill variety is necessary to exploit arrangements such as just-in-time (JIT) and modular production. But variations or new responsibilities such as self-maintenance may be small and it is more accurate to speak of an enlarged number of interchangeable tasks carried out by substitutable labour, or a broader scope of skills not higher ones (Elger, 1990; Pollert, 1991; Delbridge et al., 1992; Altmann, 1995; Rinehart, 1998). As for 'new' skills, such as being a good team member, Nissen and Seybold (1994: 42) argue that, 'This is not genuine skill being sought, but rather worker attitudes and personal characteristics most useful for company profitability.' Team working certainly creates opportunities for restructuring the labour process. In the commercial vehicle sector in the UK management now exclusively recruit semi-skilled workers (Thompson et al., 1995). Team working provides a focus for the break with craft traditions and their associated demarcation problems. In many factories inside and outside the sector it is not unusual to see ex-craft, semi-skilled and 'raw' labour deployed in the same team. The same restructuring also affects supervisors who are either eliminated, moved sideways or have to compete with others for new positions such as team leader, echoing some of Braverman's themes of proletarianization.

New developments also build on the old patterns rather than replace them:

> Much of the restructuring of work activity takes place in jobs that have been designed to re-integrate or knit tasks back together, shifting the pattern of the division of labour. Yet the newer division of labour, often incorporating 'head' and 'hand' tasks, is built on the early base of divided work. (Greenbaum, 1994: 64)

This emphasis on continuity is given partial endorsement by more realistic management writers such as Peter Wickens, Nissan ex-Personnel Director, and Paul Adler in the USA. Wickens (1992: 84) admits that, 'lean production retains many Taylorist elements', and notes that the work of line operators is still 95 percent prescription

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and 5 percent discretion. Adler (1993) describes the system in operation at NUMMI and other advanced manufacturing plants as a 'learning bureaucracy', but that learning is based on an obsession with standardized work procedures based on a more sophisticated application of Taylorist techniques. Whether it is the development of new engineering standards systems in retail distribution (Wright and Lund, 1996); the search for standardized procedures and uniform, dependable practices within TQM (Wilkinson and Willmott, 1994; Tuckman, 1994; Jones, 1997); or the search for one best way through benchmarking in the auto industry (Leary, 1998), the shadow of scientific management continues to fall over contemporary work organization.

It is also possible to extend Braverman's themes of the spread of the logic of capitalist rationalization into the service sector. While Ritzer's (1993) 'McDonaldization of society' thesis derives from a radical Weberian analysis rather than a Marxist one, it tells substantially the same story of the spread of calculable, predictable, quantified processes to an increased range of retail, leisure and media services. Nor is this an isolated study. A range of researchers, including Gabriel (1988), Leidner (1993) and Segal-Horn (1993), show how organizations have shifted from reliance on the social and technical skills of the workforce to an 'industrial model' which rests on standardized organization of tasks, routine information transfer and technologically determined work pace. In retail and hospitality outlets maintenance of a competitive edge is often linked to the reproduction of a standardized service encounter, monitored through new control systems such as report card surveys of employee attitudes and behaviour through real and company-employed 'shoppers' (Fuller and Smith, 1991; Jones et al., 1997). Heavily scripted interactions, electronically monitored for deviance from managerially specified rules and routines are also characteristic of the fast-growing sector of telesales or call centres (Taylor, 1998).

The 'working smarter rather than harder' argument has been challenged by emphasizing the costs of restructuring in terms of work intensification (Turnbull, 1988; Parker and Slaughter, 1988; Elger, 1991; Garrahan and Stewart, 1992; McArdle et al., 1994). A number of studies of Japanese/lean production argue that they lead to hyper-intensive work (see Smith, 1994: 54). Certainly, intensification has been a major characteristic of advanced work arrangements such as JIT, which rely on continual and controlled pressure (Turnbull, 1988). TQM is also partly geared towards eliminating

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slack and waste in the system. Once again, more honest managerial commentators acknowledge that lean production and continuous improvement systems lead to 'more and more strictures on a worker's time and action' (Klein, 1991: 62). As Rinehart (1998) recently noted, such realities have led to a retreat from earlier claims that lean production necessarily provides challenging jobs for multiskilled workers in high trust environments to the safer territory that 'optimal efficiency' of lean manufacturing requires high involvement work practices (Kochan et al., 1997).

Whether it be the 'flexibility' of adding extra duties, eliminating breaks or shouldering the increased workloads of 'delayered' organizations, mainstream business opinion now increasingly regards work intensification as the inevitable price of contemporary competitiveness. As Harrison (1994) observes, 'lean and mean' is the order of the day. Such competitive conditions have increasingly been introduced into the public service sector, particularly in the UK. Internal markets, new forms of managerialism and funding cuts which increase the staff–'client' ratio also lead to increased workloads and degradation of labour (Willmott, 1993a; Dent, 1993). What is more, in contrast to management writers who assert that collegiality and professionalism are spreading to all employees, there is considerable evidence that technical and professional labour (Randle, 1995; Beirne et al., 1998) is subject to greater pressures for marketable outcomes, a reduction in the space for individual initiative, tightening of targets and standardization of processes and products.

Control

Having long ago abandoned any association between a unitary notion of capital and the privileged pursuit of Taylorism as a management strategy, LPT has spent considerable time outlining alternative modes of control. But even this does not go far enough for some. One of the most remarkable and naive features of many of the new paradigm arguments is the view that organizations are moving from models of control to one of commitment. As with earlier research on job enrichment or quality circles, radical critics have been highly sceptical about the extent and character of organizational change (see Ramsay, 1991 for an overview). More specifically, studies of 'self-managed' team working stress the relatively

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limited nature of delegation of authority (Boreham, 1992; Rinehart et al., 1997), while those on the amount of decision-making autonomy in teams show the empowerment rhetoric is often empty and managerial prerogative largely intact, with, for example, only a small minority of teams electing their team leader (Murakami, 1994). Though there are a few high profile examples of higher levels of autonomy such as those sites investigated by Cutcher-Gershenfeld et al. (1994), most case studies confirm a much more pessimistic conclusion about the extent to which control practices have significantly altered.

With respect to TQM, recent evidence shows that while workers do respond positively to attempts to draw on their expertise and reductions in close supervision, existing hierarchies still constrain attempts to delegate power and expand involvement for employees (Dawson and Webb, 1989; McArdle et al., 1994; Kerfoot and Knights, 1994) and even managers (Munro, 1994). Among professionals and managers, self-regulation and localized autonomy is increasingly giving way to external control or regulation through audits and assessment in the public sector (Wilson, 1991), and the use of financial targets, temporal deadlines and outsourcing in the private sector, even within the heartland of symbolic analysts such as software producers (O'Rainn, 1998; Sharpe, 1998).

Radical critics of new management practices have not necessarily been content to provide empirical justification for a sceptical outlook. There is also an emphasis on new forms of labour subordination, particularly from those researchers in Britain who combine LPT with Foucault (1977), concerning the rise of a distinctively modern form of disciplinary power. While TQM, team working and other aspects of new production systems devolve some responsibilities to teams and operators, tasks are, if anything, more closely monitored and strictly controlled. To add to the managerial armoury of external surveillance, the additional twist is often extensive peer surveillance of behavioural norms and outcomes such as attendance and productivity (Delbridge et al., 1992; Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992; Barker, 1993; McKinlay and Taylor, 1998). Self-management becomes self-policing or 'mutual control', aided by electronic technologies (or panopticons, to use Foucauldian terminology) that allow management to have an omnipresent eye on the shop or office floor. Panopticons are less likely to be buildings, but electronic or informational devices focused on technical and social supports to JIT and TQM systems. While, as we discuss

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later, this writing often has an overdeterministic view of technology and underplays resistance, it nevertheless restores an emphasis on the centrality of control to management practice, albeit wrapped up in the language of surveillance.

Evaluation

The maintenance of a critical account of the constraints to and 'dark side' of new work systems is a substantial achievement for research informed by LPT. But for all the need to maintain a healthy scepticism, the balance between change and continuity has not always been adequately grasped. Little is gained by simple refutation or seeking to replace one overarching label with another, albeit a negative one. We would argue that real, though uneven, changes have taken place and that, for example, it is wrong to dismiss new production arrangements as a form of super-Taylorism. The fact that workers are controlling and monitoring themselves clearly matters. Though workers' knowledge continues to be appropriated by management, the move away from narrow specialization and devolved responsibilities, however limited, marks a significant break from those parts of Taylorism based on a clear separation of conception and execution. The other big change is in the conception of skill. While some commentators have always maintained that Braverman's notion of skill was too individually based (e.g. Elger, 1982), our understanding of the labour process needs to be rethought in circumstances where the relation between a person and a machine is being replaced by the relation between a team and an increasingly integrated production system. Recent research by one of the authors (Thompson et al., 1995) into changes in the commercial vehicle industry illustrates the point. Many of the individual tasks continue to be further deskilled under the impact of standardized procedures and uses of new technology. But, the *collective* labour of the group involves expanded cognitive abilities and extra-functional skills, for example in the form of greater need for problem-solving and decision-making powers, or qualities such as communication and cooperation. The mobilization of emotional and aesthetic labour or competencies in the service sector is also significant. Management is indeed concerned with identifying and utilizing the knowledgeability of employees, but that is very different

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from the overoptimistic image of the knowledge worker (see Warhurst and Thompson, 1998 for an expanded critique).

Some of these skills are different, but in contrast to the views of critics mentioned earlier, in principle they are no less significant for the technical division of labour. How advantageous such changes are for workers in terms of job satisfaction or controls is contingent on relative strengths or labour and capital in given circumstances. But while LPT continues to emphasize the constraints imposed on the transformation of work within capitalism, it is not dependent on deskilling or Taylorism as its characteristic forms. Labour process core theory merely recognizes that competitive relations compel capital to constantly revolutionize work, and that within that framework, capital and labour will contest the character and consequences of such transformations.

That process of contestation has been in danger of being neglected in many recent accounts of new forms of control. It is true, as we have already observed, that labour market conditions have led to employees accepting much heavier workloads inside lean organizations. We also accept that while some controls have been lightened, new normative ones have often been introduced whereby management ask for and reward conformity to behavioural rules. But there is a real danger of returning to the accusation levelled at Braverman, at least in the sense that accounts of resistance have been displaced by a focus on the success of new management practices in many of the new Foucauldian-influenced studies (see, for example, Delbridge et al., 1992; Barker, 1993).

The idea that the modern worker is inside a prison of all powerful electronic, social or self-surveillance confuses the formal characteristics of systems such as JIT, TQM or team working and the intent of some managements, with the real outcomes, which remain influenced by uneven and incompetent management implementation, plus continued resistance and informal workforce controls (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995; McKinlay and Taylor, 1998). It is unfortunate, therefore, that radical scepticism has been focused on questioning the nature rather than effectiveness of new management practices. Supplanting the concept of control with that of surveillance is particularly unfortunate in that it leads to a one-sided and top–down approach. Labour therefore disappears from the process partly because of the tendency to believe management monopolizes knowledge and marginalizes other representations and identities (Deetz, 1992).

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In the labour process debate in Britain, the earlier emphasis on identifying patterns of control and resistance has been increasingly challenged by what one of its younger advocates bluntly describes as 'the importation of critical social-psychology concerned with the management of identity and security, and the subjugation and constitution of individuals through panopticism and cultural managerial discourse' (O'Doherty, 1994: 2). The next section further explores those themes.

A Missing Subject?

Though few cared to admit it, Braverman's decision to exclude consideration of employees' subjective responses to the transformation of work came as a relief after seemingly interminable discussion of class consciousness and alienation. But it was unsustainable and soon rectified by Friedman, Burawoy and others. During this second wave of LPT the subject was (re)inserted in three main ways. First, as a source of opposition to capital; hence the creation of the 'control-resistance paradigm'. Second, as a source of creativity, without which capital could not successfully transform labour power into profitable labour. Third, as a source of consent, notably through labour's participation in workplace games and routines. This emphasis on the means to explain both antagonism and accommodation may seem contradictory, but as Cressey and MacInnes (1980) put it, that contradictoriness is at the heart of the two-fold relationship between capital and labour. What had been added in this phase was labour as active agency. In one sense it can be seen as a classic case of bending the stick back in the dialectic between action and structure, though clearly within the specific parameters of the wage–effort bargain and employment relationship.

For over a decade a poststructuralist tendency in the British labour process debate has conducted a relentless campaign against what it sees as the limitations of existing orthodoxy and to insert a new conception of subjectivity (Knights and Willmott, 1989; O'Doherty and Willmott, 1998). Their objections to existing efforts were two-fold. Despite some useful corrective features and lively ethnography, no one had adequately theorized subjectivity, and all contributors manifested some version of the deadly sin of dualism (control and resistance, structure and action, subject and object). At the core of the alternative is a notion of *identity work* carried

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out by individuals. In modern society identity becomes a major pre-occupation because the modern subject is constituted as both 'autonomous' and divided from others. Therefore there is a tension between the attempt to secure a stable identity and the particular conditions of modern life. This attempt to create a sense of the ambiguity of human agency appears and to an extent is a timeless, existential perspective. But the workplace is a key terrain for identity work and this eternal struggle to realize self-identity helps to explain the interdependent relationships between capital and labour and employee identification with the goals of the enterprise.

Additionally, a further layer of explanation is added that draws on Foucault, in which an individual's subjectivity arises from power relations which in turn generate conceptions of identity (Knights and Willmott, 1989: 566–7). This is the escape hatch from dualism. Power relations in modern society are seen as focusing on a plurality of disciplinary mechanisms, techniques of surveillance and power-knowledge discourses. Despite the pervasive imagery of the panopticon, such mechanisms are not simply top–down, but are self-disciplinary, working in part through tying individual identity to the positive attraction of participation in practices which provide a sense of belonging. In turn this renders them vulnerable to the expectations and demands of power. Though not working self-consciously in a labour process tradition, the most comprehensive application of Foucauldian perspectives comes from Rose (1990). The 20th century has seen the progressive infiltration of subjectivity by power. Organizations in workplace and society have, with the help of psychologists and other experts, increasingly produced the employee and citizen as a knowable person whose subjectivity is publicly constructed, observed and recorded, then internalized as self-discipline. The 1980s are seen as marking a qualitative leap forward in revamping the 'psycho-technology of the workplace' (Rose, 1990: 103) and fashioning the 'optimised autonomous subjectivity of the worker' (Rose, 1990: 105). Such themes, as we saw earlier, have been taken up and turned into a critique of contemporary management control methods by a number of writers in a labour process tradition. There is additional opportunity for exploring issues of identity in the rise of corporate culture, given that such theory and practice often have a more explicit concern with 'engineering the soul' and acting directly on employees' subjectivity and emotions (Willmott, 1993b).

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Unfortunately, in the search for subjectivity *labour* as a subject has gone missing. As we have already observed, management has become the central actor, the author of new initiatives and disciplinary practices which labour is subject *to*, or subjects *itself* to. There is, in other words, far too much emphasis on discourses or practice which operate on the subjectivity of labour. Too often the language of Foucauldian-influenced researchers is of the 'good' or docile worker who adjusts to the techniques propounded by those who would engineer our souls (for example, see Rose, 1990: 11). A particular problem in the failure to 'see' labour as a continually resistive subject is a loss of distinction between intention and effect in managerial action. Everything therefore becomes discourse in which the subject of action is lost (Newton, 1994). No matter what the employee does at work as individual or collectivity, labour remains trapped in a seemingly self-defeating struggle against normalizing disciplines or for the holy grail of ontological security. These problems are part of the explanation for the absence of any substantial recognition of resistance in applications of Foucauldian ideas to the labour process. Despite its formal place in the understanding of power relations, the role of resistance is undertheorized and seems to exist mainly as a reaction to and stimulation of power. At a more empirical level, extensive case study and survey evidence reviewed by Thompson and Findlay (1999, forthcoming) lends little support to the idea that employees have internalized new managerial requirements and values.

Labour is marginalized in a second, significant way. Employee action is used as an illustrative example of the eternal struggle for and against self, and as subjects of modernity engaging with constraints and opportunities offered by disciplinary power. But any distinctive features of the relations between capital and labour in the workplace or wider political economy are largely set aside. Surveillance replaces control as the central concept, the former reflecting the view of the workplace as just one site of disciplinary power. The indeterminacy of identity replaces the indeterminacy of labour within which relations of control and exploitation are seen as embedded by LPT.

The debate about subjectivity has divided UK labour process debates in an increasingly sterile way. Given the particular analytical basis of the core of LPT (Thompson, 1990), it is more important to recover the missing self-active subject than to develop a full account of subjectivity or identity. Nevertheless, these processes

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are important, the issue is *how* we should understand the processes involved. Drawing on older sociological traditions, we would argue that both capital and labour draw on *symbolic resources* in their relations of contestation and cooperation in the workplace. They do so within power struggles in order to assert their own identities or shape others, and to legitimate their own actions or delegitimate others; or as a means of surviving and mastering particular conditions of work and employment. The task is not so much to insert an understanding of the missing subject into labour process theory, but to develop an account of such relations which is located within the specific contest of the capitalist labour process and political economy. This is particularly pertinent to our next area of discussion.

National and Global Dimensions and the Labour Process

Putting the National in the Labour Process

In contrast to Braverman's focus on capitalism as a *system*, post-Braverman debates have sought to introduce the idea of national variants in capitalist formation, of competition between capitalist forms of labour process organization, and a much more conservative agenda of change *within* rather than *beyond* capitalist social relations. *Labor and Monopoly Capital* appeared when the USA was the pre-eminent world capitalist power, when US institutions, such as the multidivisional firm, and labour-management practices, such as scientific management and human relations, were considered the most 'modern' available. There is one (historical) reference to Japan in the book (Braverman, 1974: 284); discussion of newly industrializing countries is only in terms of their subordination to developed countries; continental European capitalism, especially that of Germany, is only cited in relation to its historical development, and not as a rival to the USA. The idea that there could be competing forms of organizing the labour process *within* capitalism does not fit Braverman's project. Yet, today it is hard to speak of the capitalist labour process as a single experience, as though US capital–labour relations were equivalent to those in Japan, France or Sweden. The *political* has become critically important in the post-Braverman debates on the labour process (Sabel, 1982; Burawoy, 1985; Thompson, 1989).

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Conversely, at the same time that the nation has been written into labour process debate, the power of the global marketplace and what some see as the 'hollowing out' of the national economy, became incomparably more developed than when Braverman was writing. Production is becoming transnational; foreign direct investment by companies increased four times faster than world output, and three times faster than trade between 1983 and 1990 (Beneria, 1995: 45). The growth of transnational companies has extended the production of commodities, sucking millions into waged labour, and integrating their contribution to commodity production in disaggregated and spatially distinct ways. Moreover, trade liberalization schemes and the regionalization of economic activity into distinct blocs, are accelerating globalization and eroding the autonomy of national economic actors. Therefore, the national is becoming more vulnerable as a viable boundary of economic activity and consequently as a seriously autonomous space for instituting distinct forms of labour process organization.

To understand the labour process today therefore requires that we decentre the USA as capitalist exemplar par excellence, and introduce political considerations, such as the influence of national institutional settlements on employment relations, the role of regional economic forces, such as the European Union, and local forces, such as in the idea of 'industrial districts', where cooperative and corporate agencies aim to construct factory regimes of particular sorts within distinct geographical areas. Antithetically, the spatial disintegration of the firm, the re-emergence of subcontracting, the growing international division of labour and the powerful place of transnational companies within capitalism, means the nation-state is not the only force operating on labour inputs and labour process organization. Benchmarking, 'best practices', extensive and accelerating borrowing of methods of organizing work between companies and countries, especially those regarded as pace setters or 'models', means labour is socialized and labour processes exposed, simultaneously to both national (local) and international (universal/global) pressures. Where Braverman spoke through the experience of US capitalism and treated this as both a modern and *universal* functional capitalism, today we need to retain a clear sense of the *global* and the *national* when studying particular labour processes.

European writers can be said to have been influential in rediscovering the national. Europeans had to deal with the rise of US economic hegemony, which produced both defenders of national

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ways of doing things, typical of British defence of craft organization, enthusiasts for US methods, as well as those who advocated more selective cocktails of the new and old. Within a universalist labour process analysis, the USA was identified with the most advanced, and therefore the most modern and one best way of organizing work. European writers who emphasized the continued role of national diversity and difference, could be labelled reactionary in the face of US technology and methods of production. There is still a strong tendency within US writing to regard deviation or critical engagement with 'modern' (US or US-inspired) production methods as reactionary. But when the deviants proved neither aberrant nor unsuccessful, but rather presented competitive advantages in the international marketplace, then writers were increasingly compelled to take seriously and acknowledge other ways of doing things. US writers who acknowledge the place of the national have tended to do research in or engage with European societies (Sabel – Italy; Burawoy – Hungary) or other powerful states, such as Japan (Kenney and Florida, 1993). Theoretically, some of the most sophisticated attempts in comparative labour process analysis have been by European writers.

The 'societal effects' school, or 'Aix Group' (Rose, 1985), emerged within organizational sociology in the 1970s, and produced ideas which have advanced across industrial sociology, industrial relations and the labour process debate.

> By means of cross-national comparisons of organizational units which were fairly identical with regard to acknowledged contingencies, this Group has identified quite a large cross-national variety of organizational forms and practices which though unrelated to task context or performance difference, is very closely bound to institutionalized human resources (education, training, work careers), social stratification and industrial relations. (Sorge, 1991: 162)

British writers using their methodology (Lane, 1989) have critiqued the universalism of Braverman's 'deskilling thesis' by bringing into focus different patterns of training and skill formation between capitalist societies, suggesting that social 'institutions' mould capitalist social relations in distinctly 'national' ways, so that there is no generalized tendency for capitalism to deskill or for the labour process to express the same antagonistic relationships between labour and capital as seen in the UK or the USA. Workers' and managers' expectations of and perceptions of each other are partially cultural, informed by historical experience, and the training, education and

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qualifications learnt through different social institutions. In extreme form, this school discounts the idea of *the capitalist labour process*, all that exists are national variants of 'ways of working', a menu of social relations prepared by national histories and not economic or functional structures of a supranational capitalist system.

The problems with this approach are many. Nations do not circumscribe capital, as transnational firms, cross-border economic integration, regional trading and political blocs, increasingly constrain the nation-state. Ideas such as 'globalization' even suggest the demise of the nation-state as an economic actor and arena for workers' struggle, but there are many problems with such a view. Moreover, dominant countries have always evolved ways of organizing work which are emulated by other firms in other states. In addition, the idea that different national ingredients produce totally different national cakes, overstates the range of diversity within the capitalist market system, where structural essentials, such as waged labour, unemployment, wage-effort bargaining and conflict inscribe a limited repertoire of roles and parts for those on this particular stage. Finally, supply side assumptions of a common societal patterning to work ignore subnational and supranational structures, such as international industrial sectors, common technological imperatives, and the very specific histories of particular factories in local labour markets and regions (Turner and Auer, 1994; Mueller, 1994; Thompson et al., 1995). Societal or institutional approaches are close to functional sociology; firm action is overdetermined within this framework, and action by managers and workers removed from the firm to the institutional competencies of particular training, industrial relations and education systems. For these reasons, a strict societal effects model of the labour process is inadequate, it must seek to synthesize with wider structures and forces of both capitalism and between rival state models of how to organize work, and must retain the autonomy for social action within the firm, rather than reducing such action to an epiphenomenon of institutional capabilities.

National-Systemic Thinking and the Labour Process

However, even for strict followers of the 'societal effects' school there is a tendency to see some national institutional arrangements as more effective in handling new technologies, advanced

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organizational thinking or leading edge practices than others (Smith and Meiksins, 1995). Not all states evolve levels of efficiency in the workplace which are 'functionally equivalent' and equally effective. Those who have tried to develop more synthetic comparative analysis (Child, 1981; Lane, 1989), or those who have attempted to construct post-Taylorist or alternative modern versions of work organization, have sought to transform certain national patterns into systemic or general 'models'. Certain societies are identified as evolving or representing *paradigmatic* exemplars of labour process and business organization. It is then assumed that these more 'advanced' or 'modern' forms will diffuse to other societies as 'best practice' models through the imperatives of market competition and efficiency superiority. The tension between the nation as distinct arena, historical instance and as general model is therefore set up, but rarely critically dissected.

Labour process writing post-Braverman has advocated post-managerial, post-Taylorist models of capitalism, and looked to different national examples, especially German and Japanese experiences, as sources of *new model* capitalism. Common to such models is a stress on *cooperative* relations between firms, workers and managers, and between firms and the state. The idea of moving 'beyond market' relations, beyond economic calculations based on 'price' and the 'cash nexus' towards a concern for 'quality' and 'reciprocity' is also a common theme. Traditional bases of action, such as the family, community or 'clan' have been retheorized as both persisting within 'rational-legal' capitalism, and being more 'effective' at delivering higher productivity, as 'trust' and 'shared values' are deemed solvents of the complications and corrosive features of the narrow economic self-interest of naked or 'pure' capitalism. Hence, premodern/pre-Fordist forms, such as 'family organization' and subcontracting 'communities' or 'industrial districts', have been 'rediscovered' *within* monopoly capitalism, for example 'high-technology cottage industry' (Sabel, 1982). And postmodern, post-Taylorist forms which stress cooperation or the partial socialization of the market are discovered to be dominant in certain societies (Japan, Germany) which provide exemplars or new paradigms for organizing work more generally.

'Cooperative' capitalism can be produced either through powerful legislative frameworks, cartel-like inter-firm links and powerful trade unions, typical of German inspired cooperative capitalism (Chandler, 1990); or from the dominance of giant enterprises,

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extensive inter-firm, long-term relational subcontracting networks and the integration of labour into secure employment, typical of Japanese-inspired 'alliance' (Gerlach, 1992) or 'collective capitalism' (Lazonick, 1990: 24). Kenney and Florida's (1993) concept of 'innovation mediated production' or Womack et al.'s (1990) 'lean production' borrow from Japanese large-firm practices, and abstract and disconnect these from their national context to create more neutral/universal paradigms. But in theories of new model capitalism there remains an unresolved tension between *national-institutional* or embedded conceptions of capitalism, tied to a particular society; and *national-systemic* conceptions, which posit looser relations between society and system, and raise the idea of decoupling 'national competitive advantages' from national context, and their packaging and diffusion as techniques, models and principles learnable in other societies. For example, Fruin (1994: 318) berates managerialist efforts to learn from Japan by abstracting practices such as JIT, quality circles and the like, and bolting these on to the western firm as fundamentally misunderstanding the institutionally embedded nature of the 'Japanese enterprise system'. Managerialists (Vogel, 1979; Pascale and Athos, 1982; Ouchi, 1981; Womack et al., 1990) have a tendency to take the paradigmatic case from the national, whereas, business and economic historians (Chandler, 1990; Fruin, 1994; Lazonick, 1990) either remain at the level of national historical specificity, or built more cautious 'national systemic' models which lack generalizability.

The problems with national-systemic thinking are that:

- It freezes historical evolution of national 'models' and thereby ignores continued development – witness the recent crisis in Japan at a time when the Japanese 'model' is being diffused as a panacea of western capitalism (see Berggren, 1995; Elger and Smith, 1994; Sako and Sato, 1997; Smith and Meiksins, 1995). Similarly, the German 'model' has been changing, when those outside Germany identify it as a way forward for capitalism – for example, the British Labour Party (Lane, 1994).
- It reproduces universalistic thinking about the labour process – the idea of 'one best way' when further diversity is increasing. In particular, ideas such as 'Confucian capitalism', which abstract from the experience of several South-East Asian economies, or eastern vs western capitalism, squeezes the national out of the picture (see Wilkinson, 1996).

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- Conversely, it creates the possibility of as many models of capitalism as there are nation-states, which effectively means abandoning any notion of capitalism in favour of national economic systems.

Models of capitalism have their roots within particular national contexts and have always existed in writing about the labour process. Marx wrote through the British experience to speak of capitalism in general, when Britain was far from archetypal, simultaneously containing special and general features – see Lazonick (1990) for a discussion. Braverman (1974), less self-consciously, used the USA as typical of 'monopoly capital' in general. Given that 'pure' capitalism cannot exist, then historical accounts of labour process organization are always *particular* stories. Therefore caution is required when attempting to abstract from history 'common' or 'typical' features of a 'system'. We have to disentangle the various levels of influence offered by the international trends and forces of global capitalism, the distinct institutional patterning of work within a given country, the borrowing and diffusion of new 'best practices', and the specificities of workplace-level historical and local contingencies. In some instances the national speaks to the experience of labour process organization across industrial sectors and geographical exigencies; in others, the autonomy of the workplace, local labour market conditions and patterns override any national or international typicality of standards. Theoretically, we cannot a priori rank such influences. We can only suggest methodologies and research strategies which will capture the nuances of analysing the labour process in today's more complex workplace.

Some recent European research projects have developed more dynamic, synthetic accounts of the evolving nature of labour process organization cross-nationally. Jurgens et al. (1993) in *Breaking from Taylorism* examine shifting competitive relations between global car companies, with particular attention to the labour process organization of new dominant players, such as the Japanese, and how labour process organization has transferred from new rising models to other car firms through emulation and production transfer. Their work, unlike others looking at the same sector, refuses to specify a single way of organizing the labour process, but rather identifies clashes between national methods, industrial relations traditions and social settlements (Smith, 1996). Turner and Auer (1994) examining work organization in the US, Swedish and German car

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industries arrive at a similar conclusion on the persistence of national variants of labour process organization, rather than convergence to benign managerialist models ('lean production') or malign, Marxist ones ('management by stress'). Mueller (1994), again from car industry comparative research (this time of engine not assembly plants), reiterates the importance of local contingencies within the life history of factories as local labour markets and capital–labour relations at workplace level provide diversity in labour process organization. Thompson et al. (1995), examining team working in the commercial vehicle industry in six European countries, focused on the meaning of skills and new labour process organizational initiatives, such as teamwork, within the plants of the companies and the wider national contexts. Their analysis agrees with what is emerging as the new orthodoxy of national specificities and embeddedness to labour process, at the same time as reinforcing the importance of the perceptions of labour use within the firm.

> The evidence in our cases . . . illustrates that the theorisations of change pitched at the institutional and universal levels are both flawed. Various elements of skill formation – the task structure, the degree of dependence on workers' knowledge, the extent of autonomy – do not necessarily form a consistent [national] 'package'. National differences remain important, but over a period of time transnationals are seeking to standardize practices within particular sectors. [But] despite the commonalties the result is not convergence given that particular companies bring their own approach to work organisation. (Thompson et al., 1995: 16)

These works emphasize the importance of examining country, company and factory levels for interpreting changing patterns of labour process organization. Moreover, they advocate a more dynamic model of developments than simple convergence to one 'capitalist' norm, or infinite national variations in labour process arrangements. It is the dynamic tensions between convergence and divergence pressures which come out most fully.

Conclusion

This review of recent developments in labour process writing and theory has signalled the continued importance of the broad approach for understanding change in contemporary capitalist societies. The continuing need to look behind official claims for

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up-skilling or fundamental shifts in the quality of work, central to Braverman's agenda, remains relevant to getting behind the almost daily claims of paradigmatic changes to the nature of work within contemporary capitalism. What have changed over the last decade have been shifts in the pattern of labour utilization and managerial controls. Though beyond the scope of this article, of equal importance have been changes in the employment relationship; in particular the rise of unemployment and decline in trade unionism, a return to 'back street' employment, sweated trades, homeworking, casual labour and employer despotism (Ackers et al., 1996).

We have also witnessed the rebirth and generalization of both external and internal contracting systems, as employment tenure has shortened in response to more global patterns of competition, together with changes to the public sectors of employment under fiscal crises in welfare states. Many workplaces have become connected to complex international commodity chains, as technology, trade, new communications and more rationalized management systems permit ever greater geographical dispersal and integration of design, manufacture and assembly of commodities. New players, especially the Japanese, have intensified work in novel ways and imposed and bargained distinct contracts with labour and capital which are now spreading outside Japan through transfer, borrowing and transplantation by Japanese firms. These trends are dynamic and contradictory, however, with on the one hand new deals on employment tenure in some areas, while increasingly flexible and temporary patterns of employment spread in others. We see no single, qualitative break from the core concerns of capital–labour dynamics in these trends, but neither are we dismissive of the substantive changes that are taking place and their effect of bargaining between capital and labour within the labour process.

In sum then, a labour process perspective needs to combine sensitivity to the more individualized and employer-dominated forms of employment, which seek to engage workers' subjectivity in realizing labour power, as well as contextualize the workplace within international structural relations rather than simple local or national institutional forms of organizing. Both micro and macro changes speak to each other, but it remains the duty of writers within a labour process tradition to develop methodologies which are capable of listening to both.

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Paul Thompson

is Professor of Management at the University of Edinburgh. His most recent books have been *Work Organizations* (with David McHugh, London: Macmillan, 1995) and *The Future Workplace* (edited with Chris Warhurst, London: Macmillan, 1998). He is a coorganizer of the UK-based Labour Process Conference.

Chris Smith

is Reed Professor of Organisation Studies, School of Management, Royal Holloway University of London. He is co-organizer of the UK-based Labour Process Conference. He is currently researching Japanese companies in Britain, and is co-editor of *Global Japanization?* (with Tony Elger, London: Routledge, 1994). He has research interests in professional engineers, and recently published *Engineering Labour* (with Peter Meiksins, London: Verso, 1996).

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